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ABSTRACT

The Llano Grande Center for Research and Development started as an oral history experiment in two of Texas's poorest school districts. Since the 1920s, when this arid region in the southernmost tip of Texas was first transformed into the orchards and farmlands of the "Magic Valley," workers of Mexican descent have worked the land. Over time, agriculture has declined and unemployment has grown. The Llano Grande Center trained students to use oral history research methods to collect the autobiographical stories of their elders. Older residents now have a documented and honored place in the region's history, expressed in their own words. These have been recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and archived by students, and children at all grade levels have reworked them into fiction, artistic depictions, and even a television documentary. The histories are supplemented by photographs and videos shot by students. The project has revitalized the region's educational, cultural, civic, and economic life and transformed the Llano Grande Center into a regional intellectual and economic nerve-center for local Mexican-American communities. Interest in local folklore, dance, and art has been renewed, and additional grants have funded leadership training and community development. The center's "pedagogy of place" seminars have helped to improved morale, motivation, and methods in the school district, which has improved its performance on the state-wide Texas achievement tests. (TD)

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Llano Grande Center's Oral History Project Sparks Cultural and Economic Renewal in Texas's Rio Grande Valley

By Elizabeth Higgins Null

"Relationships. That's where educational reform begins. Relationships: building up trust; building up commitments; giving students and teachers and community people an opportunity to believe, to create change, to try something new. All this starts with one person getting to know another person—listening, talking, taking the time."

That's how Francisco Guajardo describes the spirit animating the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, the organization he directs, as it evolves from a Rural Challenge oral history project into a regional intellectual and economic nerve-center for the Mexican-American communities of the Delta area of the Rio Grande Valley, in the southernmost tip of Texas. Located at Edcouch-Elsa High School, the Llano Grande Center was funded by Rural Challenge to serve the Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District (with four elementary schools, one junior high, one alternative school, and one senior high school) and also La Villa Independent School District (with one elementary, one middle, and one high school).

Llano Grande affects, directly and indirectly, the lives of the 4,762 students attending schools in both the districts. The two districts serve Edcouch (population, 2,878), Elsa (population, 5,242), and La Villa (population, 1,388) as well as nearby unincorporated communities or *colonias*. Not only has the Llano Grande Center trained students to document the historical contributions of the people of Mexican descent who have pioneered, settled, and worked in the area, it has helped to revitalize the region's educational, cultural, civic, and economic life. All of this has been accomplished through a supportive and often informal network of teachers, students, alumni, and community members who collaborate on objectives they themselves have defined.

Edcouch-Elsa High School English teacher, David Rice, with Teri Zavaleta's fourth grade class following a reading of his own work.

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Edcouch-Elsa High School first attracted national attention because of its joint teacher and alumni effort to get its students accepted with scholarships into the nation's most selective colleges and universities. Sixty have been accepted by these schools, and about 36 have attended or are attending Ivy League Colleges. "The Ivy League college effort is not important in and of itself," says Guajardo:

> What matters is that the Ivy League symbolizes what we can accomplish, what can be possible. Students in our schools are lifting their sights and aiming for a future based on knowledge, skills, and information.

When Llano Grande photographer Yvette Rodriguez takes pictures as part of the documentation process, she allows the viewer to look at the world through a variety of different lenses.

Velma Valdez, an Edcouch-Elsa sophomore, interviews her father, Jose Valdez.

The children influenced by Llano Grande Center programs come from two of Texas's poorest school districts. Ninety-one percent of the families earn less than $10,000 a year, and the combined assessed valuation per student (a district's total taxable assets divided by the average figure for daily student attendance) is $24,223. This can be compared to $802,612 per student in one of the wealthiest districts, Highland Park Independent School District in Dallas. Most parents of Edcouch-Elsa or La Villa students have never finished high school and have a limited grasp of English. Since the 1920s, when this arid, borderland region was first transformed into the orchards and farmlands of what was once known as "The Magic Valley," workers of Mexican descent have cleared the land, toiled in the fields, and harvested and processed the produce. The wages have been habitually low, and the work hard and never-ending. Often whole families, as well as individuals, traveled established migration routes to such states as Utah, Wisconsin, and, especially, Michigan, seeking work as agricultural laborers. Even today, approximately 40 percent of Edcouch-Elsa High School students follow the crops with their families. Within a few weeks, the school population can expand or shrink by hundreds of students. Many students attend two school systems.

Over time, agriculture has declined and unemployment has grown. Local school systems are the largest local employers. For all the transience and economic uncertainty, however, family and community ties run deep. There is a great love of place which makes young people hesitant to leave and which draws many of those who have left back home again.

As area students begin to use oral history research methods to collect the autobiographical stories of their elders, they find more than the expected tales of poverty, pain, and discrimination. Teachers and children alike have been inspired by the testimony of devoted, resilient men and women describing, in their own voices, how they have coped with harsh economic and physical challenges while providing for their families.

Ray Garcia, a La Villa High School student, expresses an intimate connection between the earth and heaven as he depicts work in the fields.

Together, Llano Grande researchers and informants are constructing the unrecorded social history of their economically depressed but culturally vibrant communities. Older residents, whose lives once seemed invisible to all but themselves, now have a documented and honored place in the region's history, expressed in their own words. These have been recorded, transcribed, and archived by students just as they were spoken — usually in Spanish. Students have also translated and edited the transcriptions into narratives for publication in both English and Spanish. They are now being studied and used by children at all grade levels who have reworked them into fiction, artistic depictions, and even a television documentary which Edcouch-Elsa High School students produced for the local PBS station. Oral history documents are supplemented by over 700 archived historic photographs of local memorabilia and by a rapidly developing collection of videos and still photographs shot by student researchers in the course of their work. Five ninth graders, involved in a project photographing daily life in local *colonias*, have been chosen to exhibit their works at the Smithsonian Institution (March 2000).

A Llano Grande brochure on the oral history process describes the lengthy and methodical steps students go through before each interview takes place:

- Identify interviewee
- Establish contact with interviewee
- Call interviewee, begin establishing relationship
- Set up meeting with interviewee
- Conduct research on interviewee and time period
- Prepare for house visit
- Prepare team of students and staff for visit
- Prepare technology: camcorder, laptop, scanner

Students scan historic photographs to use on CD-ROMs and the Internet. In addition to learning useful skills, they volunteer in school-community efforts to narrow the digital divide.

A fourth-grade student integrates oral history and family reminiscences with creative writing in her journal entries.

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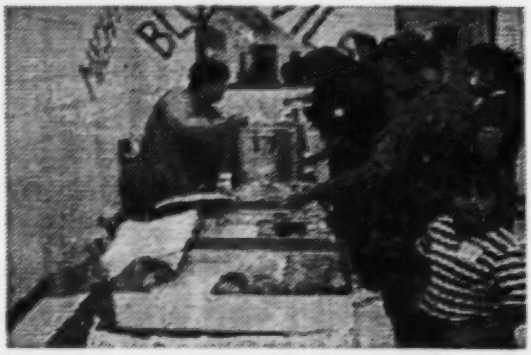
When the oral history project first got underway, students started by interviewing their family or close friends. It took patience and the cultivation of relationships, one by one, to get potential subjects to understand what information the students were seeking and to respond to them with confidence. But as news of Llano Grande's oral history project spread, especially after the bilingual publication of the *Llano Grande Journal*, many would-be informants took the intiative and approached students with stories to tell and acquaintances to recommend.

Stories led to action. Students, teachers, and community members worked together to organize a reunion of those who once worked in the large Vahlsing Packing Shed processing fruits and vegetables. They also held a conference for those who had witnessed or taken part in a walk-out at Edcouch-Elsa High School in the spring of 1968. This pivotal event, protesting discriminatory practices throughout the local school system, hastened the end of "Anglo" dominance in local politics and local schools. The Anglo minority, who had occupied most positions of authority, moved away from the area over the next few years, creating new leadership opportunities for residents of Mexican descent. This helped to strengthen common values and understandings between school and community. Several local educators were influenced and motivated by the walkout and its aftermath. Sharing reminiscences with other area residents as well as with a new, curious, and caring generation has been a way of increasing positive exchanges between communities inside and outside the school walls.

In recent decades, parents and community members have supported the schools, but their resources have been limited and the nature of their involvement, inactive. Today, local oral history research has stimulated civic activism resulting in additional funds and enhanced educational activities. The Llano Grande Center for Research and Development augmented its three-year Rural Challenge grant (first awarded in 1997), which supports oral history and other place-based educational initiatives, when it secured a MIRA

Students reenact the stories collected from older members of the community.



Community members provide refreshments at a community workshop.

grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This second grant has brought parents, students, and teachers from the region together for leadership training. Intergenerational teams explored how best to strengthen community life through the use of technology and are achieving some of their goals, such as a community computer center.

The first oral history researchers enrolled in an elective course taught by Francisco Guajardo who now teaches a variety of courses in social science research topics. Other K-12 teachers have woven oral history segments into their own syllabi enriching the study of literature, music, art, journalism, media production, drama, and history. Even more teachers express support for Llano Grande's "place-based" educational approach but are cautious about integrating its methods and materials into their classroom activities. They say the need to coach and drill students to perform well on the state-wide Texas Assessment of

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Academic Skills examinations (TAAS) allows little time for curricular flexibility. Also, according to Mary Alice Reyes, Superintendent of School for the Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District, there are scant funds to support training courses and curricula development when 90 percent of the state aid spent by her financially-strapped district must be spent for educators' salaries.

Turning the limitations of time and money into an educational opportunity, students and staff associated with the Llano Grande Center have created a "Curriculum Guide Based on Pedagogy of Place Principles." Francisco Guajardo's research seminar is training students to teach "pedagogy of place" techniques used in the oral history project This will augment the number of young facilitators who can, in turn, train other students as well as teachers. Students at Edcouch-Elsa High School have also participated, along with faculty and administrators, on a Strategic Planning Committee which has outlined the school's future educational objectives. In any case, improved morale, motivation and methods, fostered in part by Llano Grande's initiatives, contribute to improved performance on the state wide Texas Achievement tests. In 1998, Edcouch-Elsa High School was singled out as a "recognized school."

Teenage artist Delvis Cortez brings social commentary to his poster advertising a Llano Grande seminar on education and the economy.

The heady mix of oral history and community development efforts is sparking a regional interest in many aspects of local folklore, art, and literature. Elementary students, their teachers, and various community members in the Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District have developed a folklore and dance troupe which performs at localevents.

Students under the guidance of La Villa High Schools art teacher Elmira Cura explore local and Mexican themes in their art work. Edcouch-Elsa High School students have seen their own in-house radio broadcasts at school mature into a full-fledged radio station, KBUZZ (98.7 FM), for local listeners. High school students from the same school filmed and acted in the play of an English teacher, David Rice, who grew up in the area. One grant proposal is now pending to start a literary review, largely staffed by students, for writers and artists of the Rio Grande Valley. This is just one of several publication projects that the Llano Grande Center hopes to get underway.

Students celebrate their cultural heritage and integrate it with their school work by performing Mexican folk dances.

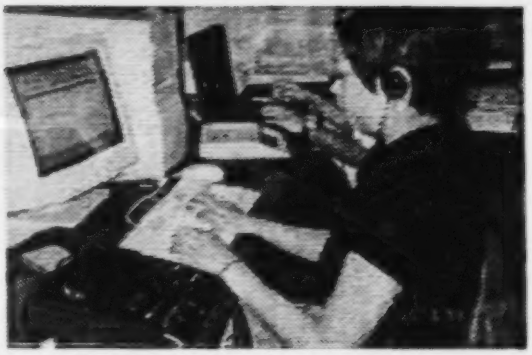
In the last year or two, the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development has become a key economic player in the region, working hard to develop job opportunities for students, alumni, and others who have developed skills in information research, collection,

and management. Employees and interns, most of them students, are transcribing oral history records on a contract basis for the King Ranch; the Institute of Texan Cultures at the University of Texas, San Antonio; and Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

Houston executive Rosie Zamora, whose mother Otila Zamora was interviewed by Llano Grande oral history researchers, has been helping the Center to become a research and survey center for the area in which she grew up. An initial group of 20 part-time bilingual workers, mostly students trained in interviewing techniques, will accumulate and analyze information to be processed by computer for hospitals, universities, and other groups seeking detailed information about the Rio Grande Valley and its inhabitants. In this way, the Llano Grande Center can help individuals and organizations assess regional assets and needs.

Another telling example of the Llano Grande Center's involvement in local economic life is the location of Edcouch's Chamber of Commerce in the Center's office at Edcouch-Elsa High School. As a result of its growing expertise, the Center has applied to draw up an economic redevelopment plan for downtown Elsa. Ernesto Ayala, an Edcouch-Elsa alumnus and Brown University Graduate (class of 99) is heading up entrepreneurial and consulting activities at the Center.

Students get involved in all aspects of film-making and video production under the guidance of Lauriano Aguirre, Llano Grande's Media and Publishing Director (foreground).



Karina Cardoza, transcribing interviews at the computer, will return to Edcouch-Elsa High School to teach after her graduation from Columbia University.

Many outstanding college graduates are returning to take part in the civic and economic rebirth of the area. Teachers, students, and local alumni stay in touch with alumni at colleges and corporations through the Center's heavily used e-mail list.

Students learn to write grant proposals in Francisco Guajardo's Social Science Research Methods and are successfully participating in all aspects of the funding process. They regularly vet their proposals with more experienced advisors through the e-mail list. They also use it to develop mentors and contacts.

Individual friendships and collaborative working relationships remain at the heart of all these activities, and community consensus is as likely to be developed over a cup of tea or a chat at the bakery as through formal committees. Progress and success are measured, in these small communities, not through improved statistics but through the quality of life achieved by individuals and families, one by one, person by person, over a period of time.

Accomplishment means different things to different students. Take the testimony of a former gang member who has found a new sense of purpose doing video production, oral history, and electronics maintenance and trouble-shooting with the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development. As he says in a foundation proposal he helped to write:

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La Villa High School art teacher, Elmira Cura, encourages students to create new works inspired by local and Mexican themes.

> The program needs to focus on students like myself. So we are doing it so that it doesn't focus on the kids who play football, or are in the band . . . . or the popular kids. Not that I don't like those kids, but they have enough chances to do stuff already. I like the idea that Llano Grande is set up for what the school calls the "at risk" kids. Kids like me.

An example of how the Center's influence is infused with personal connection and caring is a young mother's tale of what happened to her after she became pregnant. This high school valedictorian, active in Llano Grande projects, had to defer entering Stanford University in order to have her child.

> I came to the Center to get advice from Mr. Guajardo; he'd been such a positive influence on me, and I knew I could come to him. He offered me a job for the summer, transcribing oral histories. . . .I had my baby boy in September, and spent the rest of my time at home. I ran into Mr. Guajardo in March, and he offered me another job transcribing interviews for the King Ranch Archives. I hadn't thought much about working, but I decided to do it. The Center was really in full swing, involved in so many things. . . .it has given me so much hope and high expectations for a successful future, especially under the difficult circumstances I have had to face.

If the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development started as an oral history experiment pioneered by a few enlightened school administrators and teachers, it has now become a tangible reflection of community hopes and values. Residents and students alike are taking an active part in shaping their own future as they reclaim a common heritage. Telling the stories of who they are, where they came from, and of what men and women struggled to accomplish in the past is inspiring the loftiest cultural and economic aspirations.

A poster by Delvis Cortez advertises a community seminar and shows the cooperative relationship between an older and younger worker. Some of the bricks are labeled with such key terms as "knowledge," "information," and "technology."

For more information, contact the Rural Trust or the the other organization in the article:

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